

The Textual Genres of Maritime Technical Literature (Oceanic Genres) [RL-TXG]

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In the middle of the 16th century, the Portuguese chronicler João de Barros (1496-1570) makes the following declaration in his *Primeira Década da Ásia* (*First Decade of Asia*): “Entraremos no seguinte livro, que é o nono desta Primeira Década, fazendo uma universal descrição das terras e portos marítimos à maneira de roteiro de navegar de todo aquele Oriente.” (“We will go into the following book, which is the ninth of this First Decade, making a universal description of the lands and seaports of the entire Orient in the manner of a nautical rutter.”)¹

Less than a century later, the 17th-century Portuguese cosmographer Manuel de Figueiredo (1568-1622?) makes a similar claim in his *Hydrographia* (published in several editions between 1608 and 1632). His intention, as explained in the introductory paratexts, was to publish a universal rutter (*roteiro universal*) of the Iberian knowledge of the oceans, through the edition of the most up-to-date collection of oceanic rutters, providing a service to the Crown, the People, and the public good (*fazendo nisto serviço a Sua Magestade, ao Povo, e bem comum*).²

Both authors’ observations express an interest that underlines many of the topics of this research line: the importance given by contemporary authors (and a lay public)

1 Lisboa: Germão Galharde, 1552, f. 105v.

2 For a detailed description of Figueiredo’s editions see: Luana Giurgevich, [Bibliotheca roteirística: Edições impressas em Portugal dos séculos XVII e XVIII](#). RUTTER Technical Notes Series, TN n. 1, vers. 1, Lisbon, 1 June 2020.

to oceanic rutters as sources of updated knowledge, the global value of such texts and their fundamental contribution to the development of new readings of the world, and the deep transformation of pragmatic technical documents into global cultural discourses. In other words, the importance of nautical rutters did not reside only in the fact that they provided an easy-to-use set of instructions for navigating safely in high sea waters. They were so important because they were one of the primary lenses through which Europeans made sense of the globe. They were so important that were used as an efficient and flexible tool appropriated by different professional groups.

The oceanic textual genres of maritime technical literature are crucial pieces of seafaring epistemology. Deep sea navigation, with its long-distance routes, prompted the need to write down what memory could no longer hold; it prompted the need for a systematic recording and decoding of the ocean, and it prompted the creation of a new textual tradition capable of recording novelties as well as an unprecedented flow of information.

This line of research seeks to develop new insights about the production and circulation of a collective oceanic knowledge, by highlighting the ways in which rutters were conceived and used. We want to understand how early modern rutters evolved over the centuries, how they were integrated into the broader intellectual culture of their time, and how they were able to reach also larger audiences in a less specialized and more accessible way.

Oceanic rutters are not considered “finished” texts but rather “stages” in a larger process of collecting, selecting, organizing, controlling, revising and translating knowledge about the seas. Furthermore, their hybrid nature broadens the horizons of the genre and promotes readings that go through different textual genres, including other nautical genres, but also historical and geographical treatises, travel accounts, poetry, theatre, etc. In such an interesting cross-pollination of knowledge, nautical rutters are filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the experiences embodied by anonymous pilots is heard.

If a study of oceanic rutters is urgent, the preliminary inventorying task is still very pressing. This research line is responsible for: a clear definition of the textual corpus, the identification of documentary materials, the classification of textual typologies of maritime technical literature, the historical reconstruction of textual transmission, the implementation of the bibliographical resources. It also includes a standardized transcription and digital presentation of materials, to allow for an efficient comparison of documents and to go beyond the intrinsic complexity of the textual genre.

Relating to the access to the documentation and to the inventorying process, which is still ongoing, the research line has already presented two principal outputs.

The first consists of the publication of a series of inventories available online on the Technical Notes section of the RUTTER Project website: [Bibliotheca roteirística: Edições impressas em Portugal dos séculos XVII e XVIII](#) and [Roteiros portugueses dos séculos XV e XVI \(Manuscritos\)](#). The inventories are the starting point for both the publication of an inventory in the form of book and a user-friendly digital database. In terms of numbers, the sea routes and rutters included in the inventories reaches the 700 items.

The second output is the website [A Sea of Books: RUTTER Virtual Library](#). This virtual collection, organized in various sections related to as many specialized libraries on maritime literature, was conceived to show that the deep affinity shared between traveling long distances and writing practice kickstarted a colossal printing industry from the very beginning of the 16th century. The open sea voyages influenced the imagination of generations of travelers, explorers, cosmographers, men of letters and common people in vastly different ways, engaging with concepts from marine ecology, science, oceanography, marine policy and environmental history. A Sea of Books is meant to be a useful tool to start a reflection on the sheer variety of literary genres produced from the early modern experience of voyaging in the open seas.

A crucial point in the interpretation of oceanic rutters concerns their transmission to later readers. A text that is not read has little chance of survival, much less a technical and dry text like a rutter. The role of reading is key to understanding the great diffusion that such texts had, and their great diffusion as a well-defined corpus. They were compulsively written, as well as collected. The existence of great extant collections of rutters (manuscript or printed) reveals a surprising story of circulation, that on its own deserves further attention.



The RUTTER project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 833438).

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